Rural Youth and Their Transitions and Pathways Connecting School and Work: A White Paper

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A white paper summarizing the consensus of the working conference, "Rural Youth and Their Transition from School to Work," funded by the National Science Foundation (supplement to OPP-9319921) and held November 4-6, 1999 at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper is a product of a working conference funded by the National Science Foundation's *Transitions from Childhood to the Workforce Initiative* with Carole L. Seyfrit as the Principal Investigator held November 4-6, 1999 at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia. The title of the conference was *Rural Youth and Their Transition from School to Work*. The first section of the report discusses the necessity of clarifying research questions about adolescence to include a recognition of the complexities of the choices rural adolescents make as they begin to build their lives during and after secondary education. The second section of the report identifies key research issues including the following: the special qualities of the rural experience that affect rural youth, the impact of geographic factors such as remoteness from urban centers, the process of sustainable socio-economic development that creates rural jobs in both the primary and secondary labor markets, the development and implementation of school curricula that prepare students for success in their local communities and minimize the destabilization of rural communities by outmigration of rural youth, and the special needs of rural women and minorities. The third section of the report discusses methodological concerns for future research. Participants agreed that longitudinal research designs, particularly those compatible with life course research methodologies, seem most promising for understanding the lives of rural youth and that participatory action research shows the most promise for designing research on community planning and policy-making to create sustainable socio-economic development.

The report concludes with a list of recommended research questions on rural youth and their transitions and pathways connecting school and work to be considered by the National Science Foundation's panel of experts as they consider future research agendas for *The Transitions from Childhood to the Workforce Initiative*. The conference participants list these research questions in two parts with broad research questions followed by additional detailed questions. These issues were identified as important lines of inquiry requiring interdisciplinary approaches and longitudinal, comparative perspectives.

- For rural communities and rural youth, what are the intersections of social, cultural, political, and economic processes and their effects on transitions and pathways connecting school and work?
    - How do these processes differ within and across nations?
    - Within their historical context, how do these processes affect communities differently or affect one community differently over time?
    - How do these processes affect different cohorts (including race, ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic status, or marital status) within rural communities over time?
    - How do these processes affect the changing cultures of rural communities (such as creating new "needs," or developing a sense of relative deprivation)?
    - What are the effects of shifts in the labor market and demands on the pathways and transitions connecting school and work on rural communities and rural youth?
    - What is the relationship between the local, national, and global labor markets and the cultures of rural communities (including such issues as subsistence activities, seasonality, and work attitudes, preferences, or prejudices)?
    - How do these processes affect the thoughts, perceptions, expectations, and behaviors of rural youth? How do rural youth adapt and respond to these processes in the short and long term?

  - How have these processes affected the transitions and pathways of rural youth in terms of timing of and lengths between life course events (such as marriage, parenting, education, leaving the parental home, participation in the workforce and development of independence)?

- In what ways do rural individuals and communities initiate and contribute to changes in transitions and pathways connecting school and work?

  - What strategies do rural communities use to adapt to these changes?

  - What is the importance of "sense of place" to rural youth during these transitions and pathways, and how is this changing?

  - What is the role of social, cultural, and human capital in creating supports and barriers for rural youth during these transitions and pathways?

  - What are the short-term and long-term effects of community-based initiatives on these larger social processes (such as model programs on future policy decisions)?

  - How can the fit between high school education and post-secondary education or training be optimized to prepare rural youth for current and emergent careers in a changing labor force?

  - How do educational institutions and other community-based programs match or mismatch the demands (real or perceived) of the local, national, and global labor markets?

  - What are the relationships between educational institutions and rural communities in responding to these processes?

  - What are the characteristics of rural schools (such as parental involvement, school size, local versus non-local teachers, curriculum options, distance education, access to technology) that facilitate transitions and pathways of rural youth?

  - How do different stakeholders within rural communities define successful life course transitions?

  - What are the factors affecting migration into, out of, and back to rural areas? What are the effects of this migration on rural communities and rural youth over time?

  - How do differences in rural communities affect the world-views of rural youth and their interactions inside and outside of their home communities?

INTRODUCTION

This white paper is a product of a working conference held November 4-6, 1999 at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, on *Rural Youth and Their Transition from School to Work*. The conference was funded by the National Science Foundation's *Transitions from Childhood to the Workforce Initiative* with Carole L. Seyfrit as the Principal Investigator. The purpose of the conference was to consider educational, social, and economic factors affecting adolescents and their preparation for the workforce. Recognizing that traditional academic disciplines often unwittingly create barriers to sharing information and to integrating conceptions of a common problem area, the participants were recruited to include researchers at various stages of their careers in the fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and education; educators and administrators who have experience in rural education at the high school, community and technical college, or university level; and graduate, undergraduate, and high school students who are researching rural issues or who have experienced rural life. They were brought together to seek convergence in identifying empirical and theoretical problems requiring interdisciplinary investigation in the future. In preparation for the conference, participants were invited to submit recommended readings from their own research or from collateral sources as background information for the conference; the result was a briefing book containing 45 full-text articles which served to give each participant a common basis for discussion.

Mindful of NSF's ultimate goal of articulating an agenda for funding future research, the participants moved quickly over the three days from reviewing available literature and extracting what is known, to identifying gaps in knowledge, to making recommendations for that research agenda. Preliminary presentations focused on rural youth during the adolescent years and sketched current and published research on the following issues: the development of perceptions of various careers; the development of vocational aspirations; the relative roles of formal education and work experience in shaping both perceptions and aspirations; the link between perceptions and aspirations and the formation of life plans; the interactions between gender, race, and ethnicity and perceptions and aspirations; the decision to matriculate in post-secondary education; the interaction between planning for careers and other major life decisions such as marriage and family planning, and the availability of desirable jobs in rural communities. Beginning the second day, small groups were formed to synthesize themes from the opening presentations and to begin to make recommendations concerning both the topics and the interdisciplinary methods required to improve understanding of the preparation for and participation of rural youth in the workforce. By the conclusion of the conference, participants had reached a consensus concerning the recommendations they wished to make to NSF. A draft white paper was assembled during the ensuing weeks to express and to document these recommendations. Conference participants were invited to comment on the draft, and a subset of participants met January 4-5, 2000 to complete this white paper.

During the opening presentations at the November conference, the participants began to clarify the conceptual issues expressed in the conference theme. The first section of the report discusses the necessity of conceptualizing research questions about adolescence to include a recognition of the complexities of the choices adolescents make as they begin to build their lives during and after secondary education. Once consensus concerning this conceptualization was achieved, participants worked to identify research issues, which are summarized in the second section of the report. In identifying these issues, and in talking about making recommendations for the future research agenda of the National Science Foundation, participants began to realize that these suggestions raised methodological implications that require separate attention. Therefore, the third section of the report discusses methodological concerns in some detail. Finally, the report closes with a list of recommended questions for future research on rural youth to be considered by the National Science Foundation's panel of experts. Published references are cited in the body of the paper in conventional form; references to participants' unpublished conference presentations are attributed to each participant by full name and field of study.

CONCEPTUALIZING TRANSITIONS AND PATHWAYS

While the theme of the conference was expressed in the conventional language of "the transition from school to work," the participants agreed that the world of "school" and the world of "work" are not separate realities for rural youth, and they are not necessarily experienced in sequence. Rural youth work at an early age. When "chores" are considered alongside "paid work," many rural children have been working as long as they have been attending school. Many rural youth report experiencing multiple transitions between school and work as they progress from chores to paid work, as they change their minds about possible career goals, and as they change their minds about the decision to pursue vocational training or post-secondary education.

From the perspective of adolescents themselves, the process of going from youth to adulthood is perceived as "complex, changeable and negotiated" (Looker and Dwyer 1998). The notion of "pathways" signals the active nature of these transitions, highlighting the qualitative and quantitative nature of the interactions between youth, community and the larger society (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 1999:56). Most importantly, conference participants recognized that the choices and plans reported by rural youth regularly exhibit a *recursive* quality that must be conceptualized in order to represent the complexities of the issues. For example, young people who tentatively plan to go to college soon discover that this decision implies that they will likely be forced to move out of their community to find a suitable job and avoid underemployment (Elder, King, and Conger 1996). Sometimes this results in changing their minds about going to college, dampening their interest and involvement in studies at the secondary level, and choosing a career that seems to require little or no post-secondary education. Another example involves the decision to marry and start a family. Youth who had no aspirations to go to college may find that the decision to marry calls for changing their minds in order to prepare for a job in the primary labor market that has the earning power they desire to support a family. Career plans, educational aspirations, ties to community and to family, expectations of marrying and becoming parents, and preferences for lifestyle as well as standard of living all affect one another in dynamic and unstandardized ways. Future research must be capable of making sense of these realities to shed light on the decisions made by real youth in real life circumstances. Undergraduate Victoria Shaffer sketched the model in **Figure 1** that presents these issues in schematic fashion:

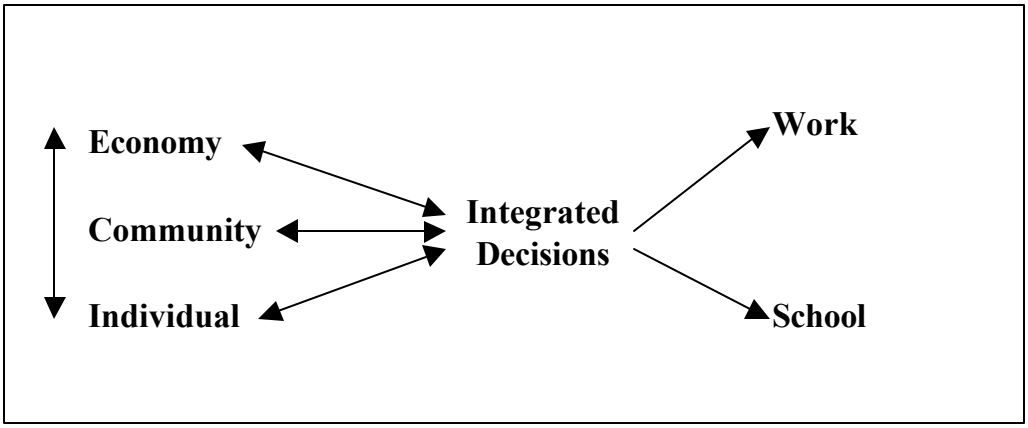

Figure 1. Model of Transitions and Pathways Connecting School and Work

According to this model, the goal of research and policy-making efforts is to allow rural youth to make decisions about their future that integrate personal, social, and economic needs and aspirations, but the

reality is that school and work are most often seen as separate, and unrelated, worlds where decisions made in one are made independently of decisions in another. In the model, all three levels of analysis—the individual, the community in which the individual resides, and the economy in which all members of the community will live and work—are themselves in transition. The result is the issue at the heart of this conference: the need for a match between the skills and special knowledge acquired by rural youth and the needs of a changing economy and community.

RESEARCH ISSUES

It is important that nations adopt policies that optimize development of *human capital* among rural youth in any given community and that maximize the fit between the human capital and the economic opportunities available in those communities (OECD 1999) . An undereducated and undertrained workforce limits economic growth and productivity, but underemployment (also known as "overeducation") or a mismatch of skills and requirements wastes precious resources and causes tension as well. One way to frame the objective of the NSF initiative on *Transitions from Childhood to the Workforce* is to state that research must provide the insights that will allow for the formation of such policies. The issues reviewed by the participants ranged from macro-level concerns such as socio-economic development to micro-level problems such as student decision-making. The larger social issues are presented first to serve as a backdrop for discussion of the research issues identified at the individual level.

The triad of the community, local business and industry, and the schools (including parental involvement) is often seen to be one integrated unit of analysis for future research (OECD 1999). While the need for increased mutual involvement (including parental participation) is a frequent theme, there is further need to understand the processes of mutual influence among these institutions as well as conceptualizing potential models for increased interaction. Participants considered a number of research issues that must receive more attention in order to support the development of effective policy.

One important issue is clarifying the notion of "rurality" for the problems at hand (Andres and Looker, n.d.). Since urban studies dominate the attention of most social scientists, "rural" in most contexts is synonymous with "non-urban," and "rural" areas are operationally defined by low levels of population density (Andres and Looker, n.d.). This approach says very little about the distinctive *experience* of growing up and having roots in rural communities, an experience which participants agreed is vital to understanding the process of adolescent development and transition. Rural communities have many of the qualities of *gemeinschaft*. For example, educator Dawn Goldstine pointed out that locals who live on the Eastern Shore of Virginia see residents of their communities in terms of "born here" versus "came here," articulating an implicit dimension of "insiders" versus "outsiders" that is salient in understanding local politics and policy-making.

Rural residents often express feeling strong social ties to their communities as well as ties to their families. Sociologist Glen Elder and his colleagues have been pursuing a systematic program of research in rural areas dominated by farming, and his research demonstrates that, compared to urban areas, families with ties to the land are very significant within community institutions (such as schools, religious institutions, and local government). Such ties make the experience of rural youth profoundly different from their urban contemporaries. For example, farm children are expected to make an economic contribution to their families both through chores and paid work, and their sense of personal significance is tied to their sense that others in the family are dependent upon them and their contributions. In these farming communities, if no one is dependent upon you, you are not very significant! Rural youth also experience older generations of family and neighbors differently than urban youth; while the world of urban teenagers is sociologically a "peer-sponsored" world, the world of rural teenagers is "adult-sponsored." The process of transition for rural youth is profoundly affected by the qualitative differences between their experiences and the experiences of their urban contemporaries, and more needs to be learned about this experience.

Geographic location, especially in terms of closeness or remoteness from urban areas, also has many demonstrable effects on rural experience. Remote regions tend to have much higher costs of living (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1993), owing to such factors as the added transportation costs of goods or the absence of local competition to keep costs down. Many remote regions retain indigenous economies revolving around traditional subsistence skills. Some remote rural areas such as those in Alaska have local economies that are highly dependent upon governmental subsidies; while the local standard of living is

relatively low, costs of living are only affordable because housing, transportation, utilities, education, and employment are directly subsidized (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1993). Rural communities have local cultures that are often the traditional cultures of the indigenous peoples. Documenting the historical context and unique features of particular geographic locations will be necessary for successful future planning and policy-making efforts. Yet, many rural communities are linked instantaneously through electronic media with urban culture as well, making acculturation possible with unpredictable consequences. Satellite television and the World Wide Web can inspire the devaluation of indigenous cultures and perceptions of relative deprivation as well as awareness of expanded options for employment, education, and cultural enhancement and preservation. One important research issue for the future is understanding both what is common and what is distinctive about the experience of rural youth around the globe. The diversity of rural areas within and across nations makes the issue all the more important.

One alternative of public policy aimed at stabilizing rural communities could be finding strategies for socio-economic development within those communities that produce jobs that are a part of the primary labor market. According to dual labor market theory, the primary labor market consists of jobs which require relatively high levels of education and skill, which offer relatively attractive packages of salary and benefits, and which consist of challenging tasks and opportunities of advancement. Many rural areas around the globe are currently in a state of pervasive economic decline as measured by high unemployment, continued reliance on traditional industries (such as farming, mining, fishing and forestry which may not be sustainable), inability to diversify local economies by attracting new businesses and industries, and continuing outmigration of young people. Indeed, current rates of outmigration threaten the stability of many rural communities. Increasing the level of education attained within a community often exacerbates this outmigration by directing students toward occupations that are not available within their communities. Further, remoteness itself is often an economic liability unless a particular locality has favorable climate or scenery that can attract tourists, retirees, or entrepreneurs (Harmon 1998).

Many community planning groups have historically embraced the notion that any types of new jobs are helpful to community stability, a philosophy Collins and Dewees (1999) have called *ad hoc* community development. One reason for this acceptance is what Seyfrit (1986) has called the "beneficial retention hypothesis." Community planners are told by potential new employers that relocation of their businesses and industries will help retain workers, and especially young workers, but there is little evidence that the beneficial retention hypothesis is correct (Seyfrit 1986; Hamilton and Seyfrit 1994; Seyfrit and Hamilton 1992). Part of the reason for this stems from the fact that much of the resulting growth is in non-sustainable industries, so retention effects are short-term fixes rather than long-term solutions. Outmigration is encouraged by non-sustainable development when students recognize the limits of the local job market and come to expect that they will be forced to take jobs in occupations different than their parents (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1994).

Another factor is that jobs created in rural areas are often part of the secondary labor market. This secondary labor market consists of jobs requiring relatively low levels of education or training, which offer relatively low wages and little or no benefits, and which offer few opportunities for advancement. For example, one documented trend is for manufacturing and production industries to locate their management and research-and-development personnel in urban areas and the more routine, rank-and-file jobs in the rural areas (Durham, Danner, Seyfrit, and Flint 1997). It is crucial for communities to develop and follow strategies of economic development which attract businesses and industries that contribute to both the primary and secondary labor markets and to simultaneously develop an educational curriculum that insures a supply of appropriately educated and trained workers to fill them.

In addition to the overall economic health of communities, the ability of schools to provide students with the education and the supports they need to find their way into the labor market and meet their life goals has been seriously questioned (Bowles and Gintis 1976). In sociological terminology, the mismatch between the skills of rural youth and the changing needs of contemporary labor markets lead to problems of *undereducation* (where skills and special knowledge are not sufficient for entry-level jobs), of *overeducation*

(where students' levels of formal education and credentials are unnecessary for available jobs and students are underemployed), or of a *mismatch* between education and job expectations.

Rural youth are often undereducated. When social indicators such as standardized test scores are used as a measure, the performance of rural schools is typically poorer than their urban counterparts within a region or state. Such instruments often underestimate the value added to these students by their schooling (Goldstine 1993), but they do point to the need for improvement in the design of curriculum and the delivery of instruction in these schools. The documented problems are many. Several participants pointed to the social distance that often exists between the professional educators in the local schools and the communities they serve. Conference participants with experience in rural Alaska observed that the policy of requiring formal educational certification from universities to be eligible to teach often had the effect of excluding native candidates so that nearly all public school teachers were both non-native and non-Alaskan. The result was that students could not identify with their teachers as models for educational success and communities had little understanding of what the school curriculum was intended to accomplish. Almeida (1996) has pointed out that the effectiveness of instruction for American Indian and Alaska Natives is also minimized by failure to train teachers in cultural sensitivity and understanding diversity, racist portrayals of Native Americans in the larger society, and the absence of trustworthy classroom materials including textbooks. Since students' culture mediates their processing of educational activities, such problems create barriers to learning wherever they exist, but especially in rural areas.

There is the frequent perception that work in urban areas is more demanding, challenging, and rewarding than work in rural areas, leading to the possible impression that the "stayers" are deficient. For example, sociologist Dianne Looker has documented that Canadian youth experience considerable ambivalence about career aspirations. Since they see urban life as having "more" of everything, they tend to see those who "stay" as less successful than those who "go." "Stayers" are characterized as those who "don't": that is, they "don't" have ambition, they "don't" care for themselves, they "don't want to work," etc. (Looker 1992). However, this is not the full picture. While the not-too-subtle message of the schools to academically talented rural youth is "You are too good to be here" (Collins 1999), many rural youth describe "stayers" in positive terms. This is an underlying tension that many rural youth face.

Rural youth sometimes have unrealistic understandings of the levels of education necessary to qualify for college admission. Since rural youth are often geographically separated from the locations of attractive future occupations, they may have unrealistically low educational aspirations given the educational requirements of those occupations (Durham, Danner, and Seyfrit, n.d.). Evidence also suggests that when students see jobs in resource-based industries as their future occupations, they often perceive education as irrelevant to their futures despite the likely demands for broad educational background to cope with the technological advances of these industries (Collins 1995; Elder, King, and Conger 1996).

Conversely, the participants also found abundant evidence that educational policies in rural schools can lead to overeducation. This seems especially likely in the most remote locations. In the United States, state-level educational policies often enact urban agendas, which means that many policies enact the assumptions of a *credential society* (Collins 1977; Shaffer 1998) despite the poorness of fit between the needs of rural youth and the pursuit of credentials. Credentialism refers to an orientation in which students are taught to believe that obtaining a formal educational credential (such as a degree or certificate) is the measure of academic success and that obtaining a credential is both a necessary and sufficient basis for success in the labor market (Shaffer 1998).

However, for many rural youth, this assumption is highly questionable. For example, anthropologist Pamela Stern reported the case of a young woman in a remote village in arctic Canada dutifully pursuing a certificate program for dental assistants despite the fact that there was no local market for dental services to employ her when she was done. Indeed, in the more remote rural areas where subsistence activities form the basis for the local economies, the pursuit of a degree adds relatively little human capital to those persistent enough to earn one because there are often no local markets for their new skills and special knowledge. In

such communities, the prevailing pattern is "casual employment" where subsistence activities are occasionally supplemented by paid work. In such cases, jobs do little to improve an individual or family's standard of living. Yet in the local schools, students often learn that "successful" students go on to earn degrees or certificates and often articulate lofty goals with little opportunity to realistically pursue them. Indeed, Howley and Barker (1997) have concluded that rural schools have played a role in the declining fortunes of rural America by promoting knowledge that would only be useful in an urban job market. The challenge for many rural school districts is to develop a *curriculum of place* in which schools not only study their local communities, but also study information and skills that will suit them to stay in their communities and be productive.

The category of rural youth is not a demographically homogeneous group. This category contains a number of more specific subpopulations whose particular problems and challenges would be lost in a more generic analysis. American Indian and Alaska Native students (Pavel 1999; Seyfrit, Hamilton, Duncan, and Grimes 1998), Mexican American women (Ortiz 1995), other Latinas (Romo 1998), and unschooled migrant youth (Morse 1997; Morse and Hammer 1998) are all examples of groups whose situations require individual attention.

Gender issues are also very important to a complete understanding of rural youth because the experience of both work and school vary by the gender of the student (Looker 1993; Seyfrit and Hamilton 1997). For example, farming in the American Midwest has created a social world that is largely male-oriented (Elder and Conger, in press). Sociologist Glen Elder noted that while farm children often experience connection with the land through their fathers, they often experience their connection with the larger society through their mothers. The social and political worlds in farming communities are also dominated by a male perspective. Most importantly for young males, there is a strong expectation that farmers' sons will stay in farming: one common theme among farmers when they socialize their sons is that "This farm is yours, you know" (Elder and Conger, in press). However, in terms of occupation, farming is simply not an option for rural farm girls, at least in their minds (Elder, King, and Conger 1996). Girls have been exposed to the expectation of becoming wives and mothers through such traditional means as "home economics" courses, but, if they aspire to careers outside the home, they are usually forced to think in terms of leaving their local communities. Research has shown that in many rural areas, girls are more likely than boys to expect to migrate after high school (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1994) and in many communities, girls do leave in higher proportions than boys (Elder, King, and Conger 1996; Langgaard 1986).

Gender typing of activities and jobs not only limits the choices young girls expect to be available to them, but also increases the social and emotional cost of these decisions as well. Marriage and parenthood can be seen as career contingencies when they occur (Looker 1993). Being committed to having a job as well as having a family means that rural women will experience more conflict than men, no matter what particular choices they make. The "cost" of motherhood is forgoing an uninterrupted career (and more chances for success), while the "cost" of pursuing an uninterrupted career is forgoing child-bearing and apparently violating what they perceive to be strongly-held community norms concerning a woman's obligation to bear children. The importance of considering gender issues in studying adolescents' transitions is perhaps best illustrated by the differential impact of unplanned pregnancies. Looker (1993) has documented that unplanned pregnancies push women *out* of the job market, but push men *into* it.

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The participants reached a consensus that longitudinal research designs offer the greatest promise for increasing understanding of the transitions and pathways of rural youth. Those modeled after *life course* research (Giele and Elder 1998) or with designs compatible with this tradition will be particularly valuable. The challenge of future research is to bridge disciplinary boundaries and to collect data which display all facets of the process of transition. The life course approach has emerged as one way to span the distinction between macro-level and micro-level designs and between narrow studies of individual subjects and broad studies of socio-economic change. Life course studies draw on the fields of history and anthropology to shed light on the location of social behavior in time and place, on the fields of sociology and social psychology to explain how individuals' lives become linked with others who share similar backgrounds and experiences, on psychology for understanding features of human agency such as self-perceptions and motivations, and on history and sociology to construct an interpretation of the timing of life events and decisions in terms of psychological and social markers such as chronological age or cohort activities. Young people do not "live" in society as a whole; they live in particular towns or villages, they interact with others in particular neighborhoods, and they go to certain schools. Future research must do justice to the impact of the immediate context of adolescents' activities, aspirations, and choices. Life course approaches excel in this regard.

There are three general strategies taken from life course theory that promise to shed light on the transitions of rural adolescents. The first is to study processes going on *within* individuals, especially the process of identity formation. At each point in a life, it is possible to look backward at what one has done or accomplished, as well as to look forward toward the future and plan or dream. Looking both backward and forward offers each adolescent the opportunity to construct a sense of self that is relevant to understanding his or her transition to the workforce. One important theoretical conception is the identification of *turning points* in a life. The extant literature on adolescent transitions contains several promising leads. For example, the decision to matriculate at any post-secondary institution seems to be crucial for minority students because evidence suggests that students who do not matriculate immediately after graduation from high school will not matriculate at all (Durham, Danner, and Seyfrit, n.d.). Other possible examples of turning points include joining of organizations that provide anticipatory socialization experiences (such as Future Farmers of America), choosing an academic major as a path to a career, getting married, or becoming a parent (whether planned or unplanned). The second strategy is to make comparisons *among* groups of individuals sharing common characteristics. Here the focus of research shifts from looking at individuals to looking at subgroups of rural youth of the same race, ethnic background, gender, religion, etc. The third strategy is to make comparisons among individuals who have experienced a common historical or economic environment. Topics that fit into this strategy include the changing prospects for rural youth interested in pursuing farming as a career because of the trend to convert family farms into corporate agribusiness (National Farm Institute 1970; Strange 1988); the changing demands for life-long learning brought on by a shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy (Shaffer 1997); and the need for multicultural competence to work successfully in a diverse workplace (Shaffer 1998).

Life course methods advocate that research designs include collection of all of the following types of data concerning the individuals or cohorts being studied: the historical context or location of the subjects; relationships with others in important social settings such as home, school, or work; relevant psychological variables such as sense of health and well-being, satisfaction, and emotional experience of life events; and, finally, the chronology of historical and personal events being recorded. The life course approach embraces both qualitative methods and quantitative methods of data collection (Giele and Elder 1998), thus, this methodological recommendation was not seen by participants as overly restrictive.

Participants also agreed that applied research focusing on community planning and policy-making should be encouraged to follow the principles of *participatory action research* (Deshler and Ewert 1995; Flora and Flora

1993; Putnam 1993). The essence of this approach is that it enlists citizens from the local community as designers and investigators of projects that can serve to meet some of the community's needs. While this approach is rightfully touted as a force for democratization in local planning efforts, sociologist Timothy Collins also pointed out that citizens can give researchers another source of information to complement their activities. One repeated theme at the conference was observation that both governmental leaders and local officials often operate from different perceptions of the realities of local life than rural residents, and especially the rural youth. Both research into community planning and adolescent transitions are dependent upon reconstructing the "social realities" behind perceptions and decisions, and local citizens often wonder whose reality "counts" in these matters. Participatory action research can employ citizens as *culture brokers* to identify and interpret the many nuances of the particular communities in which adolescents live. Participants also agreed that this strategy responds to communities' distrust of researchers, which many participants had experienced directly. Sociologist Carole Seyfrit reported that members of local school districts in Alaska where she was conducting longitudinal research were greatly surprised when she returned to report her findings as well as to arrange for additional data collection. Educator JoAnn Ducharme reported that Alaskans felt that they were repeatedly asked to cooperate with research projects, but neither learned of the research results nor perceived any impact on the local community from their cooperation. Participatory action research strategies can serve to prevent these undesirable outcomes as well as to build human capital and social capital among the residents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to focus particularly on the transitions and pathways of rural youth for a number of reasons. In the United States, one-third of public schools are in districts with fewer than 600 students (American Association of School Administrators 1999) and fifty-one percent of all school districts are small and rural (Chance and Cummins 1998). What is more, *"the rural workforce . . . still earns less than its urban counterpart. In 1996, rural workers earned only about four-fifths of what urban workers earned"* (Huang 1999:1). As Nord (1999) shows, poverty in the rural south leads the nation, with high rates of poverty for African Americans and Hispanics. Poverty among whites is prevalent in the Central Appalachian region, especially eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee and the nearby coal fields of West Virginia. Rural economies are also more vulnerable to changes in the international market (Huang 1999). The high levels of poverty and unemployment endemic to many rural areas have serious repercussions for rural youth. While there is a solid body of research on rural communities, there are gaps in our knowledge about rural youth.

The participants concur with NSF's recommendation that research on transitions and pathways must be interdisciplinary. In addition, the participants strongly encourage future research designs to be longitudinal, comparative, and participatory. Longitudinal designs have the potential to capture the manifold pathways rural youth construct to pull together the challenges in their lives. Comparative research is necessary to understand the influence of specific communities on the individuals and families who reside in them. Participatory research can have the dual benefits of allowing residents to serve as brokers to inform basic research as well as encouraging residents to take an active role in community development.

The participants reached a consensus concerning two questions, listed below, that will be central to future research on transitions and pathways of rural youth connecting school and their preparation and participation in the labor force and for the development of effective public policy. Within the two central research questions, the conference participants also recognized the importance of pursuing interdisciplinary investigations that span the macro, meso, and micro levels, that is, research that explores these questions at the social structural, community and individual domains. The particular research questions are listed below:

- For rural communities and rural youth, what are the intersections of social, cultural, political, and economic processes and their effects on transitions and pathways connecting school and work?
    - How do these processes differ within and across nations?
    - Within their historical context, how do these processes affect communities differently or affect one community differently over time?
    - How do these processes affect different cohorts (including race, ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic status, or marital status) within rural communities over time?
    - How do these processes affect the changing cultures of rural communities (such as creating new "needs," or developing a sense of relative deprivation)?
    - What are the effects of shifts in the labor market and demands on the pathways and transitions connecting school and work on rural communities and rural youth?
    - What is the relationship between the local, national, and global labor markets and the cultures of rural communities (including such issues as subsistence activities, seasonality, and work attitudes, preferences, or prejudices)?

  - How do these processes affect the thoughts, perceptions, expectations, and behaviors of rural youth? How do rural youth adapt and respond to these processes in the short and long term?

  - How have these processes affected the transitions and pathways of rural youth in terms of timing of and lengths between life course events (such as marriage, parenting, education, leaving the parental home, participation in the workforce and development of independence)?

- In what ways do rural individuals and communities initiate and contribute to changes in transitions and pathways connecting school and work?

  - What strategies do rural communities use to adapt to these changes?

  - What is the importance of "sense of place" to rural youth during these transitions and pathways, and how is this changing?

  - What is the role of social, cultural, and human capital in creating supports and barriers for rural youth during these transitions and pathways?

  - What are the short-term and long-term effects of community-based initiatives on these larger social processes (such as model programs on future policy decisions)?

  - How can the fit between high school education and post-secondary education or training be optimized to prepare rural youth for current and emergent careers in a changing labor force?

  - How do educational institutions and other community-based programs match or mismatch the demands (real or perceived) of the local, national, and global labor markets?

  - What are the relationships between educational institutions and rural communities in responding to these processes?

  - What are the characteristics of rural schools (such as parental involvement, school size, local versus non-local teachers, curriculum options, distance education, access to technology) that facilitate transitions and pathways of rural youth?

  - How do different stakeholders within rural communities define successful life course transitions?

  - What are the factors affecting migration into, out of, and back to rural areas? What are the effects of this migration on rural communities and rural youth over time?

  - How do differences in rural communities affect the worldviews of rural youth and their interactions inside and outside of their home communities?

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